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ABSTRACT

How can physical location be used as a clue to defining the identity of a college or university? This paper presents the experience of one college, Virginia Wesleyan College, exploring two issues related to this question that arose from its special circumstances of physical location with respect to surrounding municipalities. Virginia Wesleyan straddles the border between two large cities, Norfolk and Virginia Beach in the South Hampton Roads region of extreme southeast Virginia. Two issues were investigated. The first was whether Virginia Wesleyan is unique in its location's attributes. A careful and disciplined inquiry comparing the locations of 20 eligible candidate-city pairs suggests that the College is in rare, if not unique, circumstances in that respect. The second issue was whether findings could provide clues in the quest to clarify the identity of the college. It is anticipated that exploration of these issues will be the basis of a general reflection on College identity. An appendix contains details of the campus map/border situation at the College. (SLD)

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Physical Location as a Clue to College Identity: A Case Study

By Dennis R. Ridley, Ph.D.

Virginia Wesleyan College[1]

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Physical Location as a Clue to College Identity: A Case Study

Abstract

How can physical location be used as a clue to defining the identity of a college or university? This documents presents the experience of one college, Virginia Wesleyan College, exploring two issues related to this question that arose from its special circumstances concerning physical location with respect to surrounding municipalities. Virginia Wesleyan College straddles the border between two large cities, Norfolk and Virginia Beach, located in the South Hampton Roads region in the extreme southeast corner of Virginia. Two distinct issues were investigated: (1) Is Virginia Wesleyan College truly unique in the United States in the above-named circumstance? A careful, disciplined inquiry suggests, at a minimum, that the College is extremely rare, if not unique, in that respect. (2) The second issue, following from the first, was whether the findings could provide a clue in the quest to clarify the identity of the college. It is anticipated that the exploration of these two issues will provide the basis of useful reflection upon the general question posed in the title.

Physical Location as a Clue to College Identity: A Case Study

Introduction

One offshoot of the effort to develop a marketing strategy for Virginia Wesleyan College was an investigation into a special circumstance surrounding the physical location of the College. That special circumstance consists in straddling the border between two large cities, Norfolk and Virginia Beach, in the South Hampton Roads region located in the extreme southeast corner of Virginia. Two distinct issues arose, one empirical and the other a matter of informed judgment. The first issue, begun as a matter of simple curiosity, was this: Is Virginia Wesleyan College truly unique in the above-named circumstance? Is the College the only one to be found among the approximately 3600 colleges and universities throughout the country in which a portion of the contiguous border between two large cities cuts through the physical campus? The second issue, following from the first, is whether the uniqueness (or near uniqueness, depending on the findings) can provide a clue in the quest to clarify the identity of the college. It is anticipated that our experience with exploring these two issues tell a story which other institutions will find useful as they consider the role of physical location in college identity.

Studying the Border-Straddling Issue

Method

To get a handle on the above-named empirical issue, the following approach was taken. The first step was to narrow the range of search. To accomplish this focus required answering the question, "What are the municipalities in the U.S. above a certain size having contiguous borders?" This question was preliminary since, once answered, it provided focus to search for colleges that *might* lie astraddle those contiguous boundaries.

A large current Rand-McNally atlas very quickly led to a list of municipalities to investigate further. However, it was first necessary to operationally define what would be called a "large city." For purposes of this study, only cities with larger than 100,000 population were included. Secondly, of the candidate cities, the shared borders could not be defined by a body of water but must have city street connections. To supplement the atlas, a variety of hard copy and Internet-based city maps were consulted.

The next step was to assemble a list of colleges having a postal (street) address within one of the pair of cities with contiguous borders. For this purpose, the author used the *2003 Higher Education Directory*, which though not exhaustive, is a reasonably complete list of institutions of higher education in the United States. The organization of this volume by states made the task of identifying colleges and universities in the target cities relatively straightforward, albeit time-consuming. In case there were multiple campuses

for the same institution within the same city, for purposes of this study each campus provided a separate test.

The next step was to locate the physical campuses of the identified colleges and universities within the borders of the target city-pairs. In a number of cases, it was possible to do so using the available city maps that had been consulted to determine the candidacy of the city-pairs for this search. This was quite easy when the campus was large enough to occupy significant acreage and a number of city blocks, so that it appeared on the map. In other cases, Internet tools (usually *Mapquest*) were used. For most of the college and university in the list, these tools were sufficient by themselves to eliminate the institution as a possible border-straddling institution. However, in case doubt remained whether the institution might straddle a contiguous border, more detailed searches were conducted. The following were some techniques employed to decide the issue:

- Look up campus maps on college and university web sites to determine the streets or natural configurations forming the perimeter of the campus.
- Locate city maps on the Internet to determine, if possible, the bordering street names and locations.
- If borders are in doubt, use the United States Postal zip-code finder to determine which cities lay claim to certain streets (unless, of course, the street itself formed the border).
- Finally, to confirm conclusions based on the above methods, or to decide the issue if these techniques did not do so, direct telephone calls were made to responsible parties at the institution to ask the proximity between the campus and the bordering street(s) between the two municipalities in question.

Results

The first table presented below lists 20 eligible candidate city-pairs. Note that a few large cities are paired with more than one surrounding city. Since readers may think of other possibilities, a second table is included. The second table lists other metropolitan areas that were examined without yielding an eligible city-pair. Reasons for disqualification are given.

Table 1: Eligible City-Pairs
Alexandria/Arlington (VA)
Berkeley/Oakland (CA)
Dallas/Garland (TX)
Dallas/Mesquite (TX)
Denver/Aurora (CO)
Denver/Lakewood (CO)
Ft. Lauderdale/Hollywood (FL)
Ft. Worth/Arlington (TX)
Glendale/Pasadena (CA)
Hampton/Newport News (VA)

Houston/Pasadena (TX)
Independence/Kansas City (MO)
Miami/Hialeah (FL)
Minneapolis/St. Paul (MN)
Norfolk/Virginia Beach (VA)
Phoenix/Glendale (AZ)
Phoenix/Scottsdale (AZ)
Phoenix/Tempe (AZ)
San Diego/Chula Vista (CA)
San Jose/Sunnyvale (CA)

Table 2: Disqualified Cities & City-Pairs	**Reasons for Disqualification**
Boston (MA)	Dwarfs surrounding cities, all of which are too small.
Chicago (IL)	Same reason.
Detroit (MI)	Same reason.
Los Angeles (CA)	Same reason.
San Francisco (CA)	Same reason.
Washington (DC)	Same reason.
Cincinnati (OH)	Same reason.
Seattle/Tacoma/Bremerton (WA)	Seattle and Tacoma too far apart; Bremerton across water.
Greensboro/Winston-Salem (NC)	No contiguous border.
Raleigh/Durham (NC)	No contiguous border (Chapel Hill also too small).
West Palm Beach (FL)	No credible large contiguous cities.
New Orleans/Metairie (LA)	A canal separates the distinct parishes of Jefferson and Orleans.

Looking at the colleges identified, the results are easily summarized: Except for Virginia Wesleyan College (an already known example), no cases of another border-straddling institution were discovered. (However, the same methods were practiced on Virginia Wesleyan, leading to its correct identification and validating the methods against a known case.) Several cases in which the institution was located relatively close to a border were found. Those cases are listed below in rank order in terms of distance from a city border. The first two have tied ranks.

Table 3: Colleges and Universities Located, Ranked by Distance From A Common City Border (Excluding Virginia Wesleyan College)

1.5	Eastville College in Mesquite, Texas shares a street border with Dallas, although the college lies within Mesquite.
1.5	The International Institute of the Americas in Phoenix is located on 43rd Avenue, the street bordering Glendale, across the street from Glendale.
3	Amberton University in Garland, Texas lies less than a block from Dallas.
4	The Arts Center College of Design in Pasadena, California is found approximately 1200 feet from Glendale, California as the crow flies.
5	Luther Seminary in St. Paul is approximately 1400 feet or 6 city blocks from the Minneapolis border.
6	Vatterott College in Kansas City, Missouri is less than one-half mile from Independence.

Thus, after an intensive search, we can conclude that Virginia Wesleyan College's straddling of a border between two large cities is rare if not unique in the United States. However, it is still possible to take a skeptical view, concluding that since the result conformed to our expectation, we possibly did not look hard enough to locate another case that would have violated our expectation. To counter that possible view, we have made an estimate of how rare this situation should be expected to be within the United States.

Following the argument presented in the Appendix, there is a very small probability (perhaps around 5 in 1000) that the campus map of Virginia Wesleyan College might be fairly "tossed" upon the combined Norfolk/Virginia Beach map and land on a common border. Note that the land area of Virginia Wesleyan, at 300 acres, is fairly substantial for a small college located within an urban/suburban region. Therefore, that estimate might be high if extended across all of the colleges and universities found in the eligible city-pairs in this study. At any rate, arguably the estimate is not unreasonably low, in view of the fact that many institutions occupy a single building and less than one or two acres of land. In other words, we might assume that a campus map of a more or less typical institution from one of the eligible city-pairs would have no greater than 5 chances in 1000 of landing on a border between the cities in a fair toss onto a proportionally-sized map. Given the several hundred institutions looked at, the summed probabilities would be close to 1, or even chance. Of course, this estimation process is preliminary; a more sophisticated mathematical approach will be tried in the future. This line of thinking does suggest, however, that we have no *a priori* reason to expect there to be border-straddling colleges in numbers greater than a small handful at the most.

Furthermore, other reasons come to mind as to why a border-straddling college might be a rare phenomenon. For one item, parcels of land often are divided at city borders. The

presence of street and highway divisions as natural and convenient borders between bordering cities suggests that higher education institutions would tend to become established away from those borders.

For the above reasons, the actual findings therefore appear reasonable and not out of line with *a priori* estimates.

Limitations

While this study is conceptually fairly simple, it is complex in the richness of details that had to be considered and studied. In view of this practical complexity, it must be acknowledged that there were many possibilities of having made a mistake or of overlooking one or more colleges that fulfilled the search criteria. I therefore solicit any comments and suggestions from readers as to other institutions that should also be included or investigated. Meanwhile, no claim is being made or will be made that Virginia Wesleyan College has been proven to be unique in the characteristic being studied. However, again it appears reasonable to conclude, at a minimum, that straddling the borders of two large contiguous cities is quite rare.

Implications on the Study: The Role of Location in College Identity for Virginia Wesleyan College

It is a reasonable premise that for any community, which is devoted to a mission of higher learning and the liberal arts, the physical environment of that community is not irrelevant to its identity. Virginia Wesleyan College has been devoting a great deal of effort toward articulating that identity. There might well a clue to that identity in the physical circumstances in which the college has spent its entire 40-plus year history. The demonstrated rarity of straddling the border between two cities, and other related physical circumstances, might provide us with an environmental analogue or metaphor of our identity.

Sometimes clues can be so close, surrounding us on all sides, that we overlook the obvious. The exercise of looking at countless maps of all different scales, trying to find our "twin" somewhere else, tended to break the spell. Quite possibly, there is nothing out there that is even remotely our twin, even when we measure only the situational variables.

Distance from a border between two cities is only one situational variable to consider. It would be useful to examine the closest cases (Table 3 above) and consider how they are similar and differ from Virginia Wesleyan.

- One of the closest cases in terms of distance was Amberton University in Garland, Texas. While lying perhaps only a block or less from the Dallas border, one has to walk *under* the Dallas beltway, I-635, to reach the border. By contrast, at Virginia Wesleyan, the border between Norfolk and Virginia Beach cuts through

in a remote section of the campus. It is invisible to the naked eye, and no visitor would suspect it is there at all.

- Another case was the Arts Center College of Design found close to the Pasadena-Glendale, California border. The distance to the border was perhaps only 1200 feet as the crow flies—but that crow would have to fly over spectacular California canyon territory to get there! By contrast, Virginia Wesleyan is located in almost perfectly flat terrain, which blends unvaryingly into the two surrounding cities.
- One of the closest cases was the International Institute of the Americas, located in Phoenix, Arizona just across 43rd Avenue from Glendale, Arizona. One could toss a stone from their facility into the next city. Again, the physical circumstances are nothing like Virginia Wesleyan College's. Let an administrator from that institution describe the situation, as he did in an e-mail message: "The Phoenix metropolitan area is very large and is becoming more developed every day. If not for signs, you'd never know when you [had] left Phoenix and driven into Glendale, Peoria, Avondale, Mesa, or a few others." Phoenix has literally swallowed up Glendale! One side of the busy street dividing the two cities looks just like the other. As for the college itself, there is no college campus discernible from maps. Again, Virginia Wesleyan provides a stark contrast, chiefly because, from the campus, one can see almost nothing but the campus.

When we at Virginia Wesleyan look around ourselves, we can easily miss the fact that the border between two cities passes through the campus. Nothing on campus looks a city border, such as I-635 around Dallas or 43rd Avenue in Phoenix. Unless you stand on a high level of one of the stadium bleachers toward the edge of campus, you cannot even see a business establishment from campus. The wooded area around much of the campus makes one unaware that each day thousands of cars travel up and down the interstate near the campus. A suburban residential area also nearby is similarly almost hidden. Virginia Wesleyan is a kind of oasis between two cities, where the reminders of a city are virtually non-existent. Yet one minute of driving away from the campus will lift the veil.

These points are obvious after a short reflection. But what is the significance of straddling the border in terms of our identity? Perhaps that circumstance can serve as a physical analogue of how Virginia Wesleyan College is, simultaneously, an enthusiastic participant in the community and partaker in the tremendous opportunities that South Hampton Roads affords, and is also a place apart. It is a place where liberal studies, reflection and scholarship, inspired teaching, personal self-discovery, and a vibrant community can flourish. Of course, those things can happen anywhere. On the other hand, it is no accident that many of the outstanding liberal arts colleges in the land were founded in rather isolated settings—small towns and even villages. The pastoral ideal of a protected enclave for the college community has perhaps played a significant role in American higher education.

On the other hand, there is another equally powerful notion of the academy as flourishing in the great urban centers of the nation—the University of Chicago is one prime example. How better can an institution demonstrate its relevance to modern urban society than by coexisting and flourishing within it?

Can an institution have it both ways? I submit that it can. Further, I propose that it is worth considering how well the unique physical situation of Virginia Wesleyan College does suggest a physical analogue of a unique identity—one that does, really, have it both ways. When we reflect on the combination of items proposed as central to our identity, we might find that they can be organized nicely around this physical analogue. The friendly, caring community certainly is a part of that—an item that would hardly ever characterize a typical urban center of higher learning. Similarly, the care lavished on the thinking about the general studies experience would be untypical of a great many urban institutions. On the other side, the myriad ways the college is involved in a large metropolitan area—which is also a major seaport connected to the entire world—would be rare indeed in a small liberal arts college located somewhere in rural Ohio, for example.

The sociological terms "gemeinschaft" (community) and "gesellschaft" (society) come to mind. These terms contrast the solidarity between individuals stemming from membership in a community, on one hand, with the social relationships based on isolated functions or roles performed by isolated individuals, on the other. At the risk of oversimplifying, the pastoral ideal of an enclave for liberal learning, situated at a distance apart from society, is the first; the more impersonal but functional approach, characterizing many urban institutions, is the second. One might say that in the first, a student can be "somebody" but in the "middle of nowhere;" in the second, a student risks feeling like "nobody" in the "middle of somewhere." At Virginia Wesleyan College, we have it both ways. A student can feel like "somebody in the middle of somewhere."

Concluding Reflections

The empirical study and reflection recorded in this document were, in a large measure, unique to Virginia Wesleyan College. However, it is offered as a case study from which other institutions might learn. Most importantly, the document should be viewed as strong confirmation of the premise that physical location is extremely important in defining a college's identity. Once that premise is accepted, time spent investigating and reflecting upon the interaction between physical location and identity is a worthwhile investment. In searching to capture and communicate an identity of an institution, it is also helpful to focus on those features of the college's physical circumstance that set it apart and make it unique. The profitableness of that strategy is evidenced in this document. Validating the rarity (if not uniqueness) of border-straddling in the case of Virginia Wesleyan College made it possible to focus upon some characteristics that set the institution apart, both as it currently is and as it aspires to be. Truly, these physical circumstances and their rarity can serve as a physical analogue of an important part of our institutional identity.

As a caveat, it must be said that the process of defining college identity is an ongoing one. That is certainly the case at Virginia Wesleyan. Nonetheless, the physical environment as the provider of a strong set of clues should not be overlooked, as it can decidedly influence the process of identity definition.

A second caveat is that inquiries such as that presented here invite multidisciplinary discussion. The physical environment cuts across the disciplines. The common purpose that is involved in defining college identity will make it more likely such discussions will be productive.

Whether another institution might replicate a process similar to what was presented in this document depends on what the physical context might be. Those contexts vary in so many ways that it would be difficult to comment here meaningfully. However, the experience of Virginia Wesleyan should be taken as encouragement that such efforts can be productive.

Similarly, the methods used to document the uniqueness or relative rarity of a college's physical circumstances must be tailored to the nature of the properties being investigated. The study reported above addressed a set of circumstances that were special to Virginia Wesleyan College. Therefore, those methods cannot be replicated exactly in the service of a different inquiry for another institution. Nevertheless, I offer the study as a model in the sense that great care should be taken to set up, carry out, and document the study. If carefully done, it can become a touchstone, which the institution can reference when communicating an important component of its unique identity.

Appendix:
The Campus-Map/City Border Problem

The following gives some thinking about the campus-map/city border problem. Specifically, this is an attempt to estimate the probability that, if a particular campus (Virginia Wesleyan College) could be "tossed" upon the map of two cities (similar at least in area to Virginia Beach and Norfolk), it would fall upon a bordering stretch between the two cities. For purposes of making the calculations, I have simplified the problem to what might be called a geometrical model. Specifically, the simple model that I've come up with is called the "Hexagonal Model."

ASSUMPTIONS: The assumptions are the following:

1. Cities are hexagonal in shape.
2. Campuses are circular. That offers a convenient simplification in that no matter how you toss the campus map onto the city map, its orientation in terms of shape will be the same, because it is a circle.
3. The known area of the two cities determines the sizes of the two hexagons, representing the cities having contiguous borders. However, the actual shapes of those cities are ignored for purposes of this model. In practice, only the dimensions of the smallest hexagon need to be calculated, because the length of one of its sides is the limiting dimension regarding the common border between the two cities. The non-contiguous portion(s) of the largest hexagon's side and its length, on the extension of the common border, is irrelevant to the calculation.
4. The known area of the campus is used to determine the size (radius) of the campus in question.
5. This demonstration will focus on one case (Norfolk/Virginia Beach) and one campus within the two (Virginia Wesleyan College), ignoring all colleges/universities within the two cities.

GOAL: I conceive the goal to be to calculate a ratio. The denominator of that ratio will the known area of the two cities combined. The numerator will be an area, calculated on the Hexagonal Model, giving the locus of all points representing the center of the (circularized) campus map, with the condition that each circle must overlap the common border of the two (hexagonized) cities. For purposes of this calculation, we will allow a campus to merely *touch* the shared border in some cases.

CALCULATIONS:

Side of the smaller hexagon (Norfolk):

The known area of Norfolk, according to one source, is 66 square miles.

According to my calculations, the area of the hexagon would be given by the formula: $(3l^2\sqrt{3})/2$, where l is the length of one of the six sides.

Equating the above with 66 and solving for l, we find a length of 2.52 miles. (That seems quite a bit too small, but let that go for now.)

Radius of the (circularized) Virginia Wesleyan College campus:

Virginia Wesleyan has about 300 acres or about .47 square miles. Solving for r in πr^2 gives a radius of .39 miles.

Ratio:

The known combined area of the two cities is a number that I don't have with me right now, but let us assume it is 400 square miles, which is not far off the mark.

The locus of points representing all possible centers of the campus, crossing (or touching) the common border is a rectangle with the dimensions 2r and l. The area of that rectangle is 1.97 square miles.

The ratio defined above is .0049. Approximately 5 in 1 thousand is the probability of a fair toss resulting in an overlap between the common borders.

LIMITATIONS:

1. In a geographically confined area such as South Hampton Roads, bounded as it is by the Hampton Roads, the border of North Carolina (in the case of Virginia Beach), and other surrounding cities and waterways, the two cities in question tend to fill up all the available area. The Hexagonal Model seems to imply a different situation of uniform and unbounded growth. That situation might be more applicable in certain places in Texas, for example, with its more wide-open spaces.
2. Larger cities might tend to wrap around smaller cities, such as Phoenix definitely does around much of Glendale.
3. This demonstration is incomplete, as it does not include the other college/university campuses residing in Norfolk or Virginia Beach. That demonstration would have to disallow the campuses to overlap each other. (Imagine the problems of higher education coordination that would cause!) However, this extension does not appear to be much more complicated that a summation over all cases, if I am right. All the data that would be needed in addition would be the campus areas.
4. Extending the calculation over the whole country would require a catalog of the cities with common borders (which I have—it is about 15), and a catalog of the colleges in those locations (which I also have), along with campus areas. The latter I do not have. Obtaining those would be a major project. Perhaps one could make some assumptions to come up with a range of campus sizes for simulations or tests.

5. The model tried out here allows the campus map to merely touch the border. That could be fixed by decreasing the width of the target area by some amount, say 0.1r. That would require real overlaps.

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